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Viewing cable 06MANAGUA221, NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS REGIONAL REPORTING: CARAZO

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06MANAGUA221	2006-01-30 22:28	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Managua

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DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/23/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [NU](#)

SUBJECT: NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS REGIONAL REPORTING: CARAZO

REF: MANAGUA 124

Classified By: AMBASSADOR PAUL TRIVELLI. REASONS 1.4 (B,D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Meetings with political, economic and religious leaders in the Department of Carazo suggest that by far the two most popular presidential candidates there are Eduardo Montealegre and Herty Lewites. Montealegre has successfully siphoned off elements of the PLC departmental organization and enjoys significant urban and rural support, while the candidacy of native-son Lewites has sharply divided the FSLN, particularly in urban areas. The FSLN retains a hard core of supporters and the PLC departmental organization remains dogmatically loyal to Arnolando Aleman, but none of the would-be presidential candidates of either of the two traditional parties have campaigned seriously in Carazo. Most observers remain deeply concerned that a combination of CSE incompetence and malfeasance could prevent free and fair elections in November, citing local examples of CSE officials facilitating issuance of voter identification cards for FSLN supporters, while obstructing the efforts of others to obtain the documents. The loyalty of rural voters who have historically voted for the PLC remains a wild card in what most observers describe as a "naturally" anti-Sandinista department. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On January 26, poloff and political FSN traveled to the Department of Carazo, just south and east of Managua, and met local leaders of "Vamos con Eduardo", the Alliance for the Republic (APRE), the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC), and the one non-Sandinista mayor in the Department, the PLC mayor of the tiny municipality of La Conquista. Embassy officials also discussed politics, economics, and social issues with leaders of the Carazo Chamber of Commerce and the head of the Catholic Church's hierarchy in the department. The departmental representative of the Supreme Electoral Council, a Sandinista, refused a meeting, and referred emboffs to the CSE magistrates in Managua. It was clear that the real electoral campaign has yet to begin in Carazo, as its cities, towns, and highways were largely empty of electoral propaganda. The only visible posters, painted signs, and billboards dated from the 2004 municipal electoral campaign or earlier; most were for either the PLC or APRE. This cable focuses on the political elements of the Carazo trip. Post will report on social and economic issues septel.

MONTEALEGRE POPULAR AND CAMPAIGNING ACTIVELY, BUT STRENGTH OF ORGANIZATION AND DEPTH OF RURAL SUPPORT STILL UNCLEAR

13. (C) Except for the local PLC leaders, everyone emboffs met reported that Eduardo Montealegre is taking large numbers of party activists and supporters away from the PLC in both urban and rural areas. Along with Lewites, Montealegre is one of only two presidential candidates to have campaigned seriously in Carazo, with regular visits that have included even the smallest municipality. Most interlocutors believed that the national opinion polls portraying Montealegre and Lewites as the two most popular politicians in the country are reflective of popular sentiment in Carazo.

14. (C) Chamber of Commerce leaders stated that most of the current FSLN mayors in the department are performing poorly, and that both the PLC and the FSLN were largely discredited with all but their most die-hard supporters. They added that Herty Lewites had drawn away a significant number of FSLN

supporters, especially in urban areas. Virtually all business people, they claimed, support either Montealegre or Lewites (primarily the former), hoping that one or both of the two outsiders could bring the stability that Carazo and Nicaragua need in order to develop. The business sector opposed the disqualification, or "inhibition" of any candidate, but feared that the FSLN and PLC would use their control of the CSE and the judiciary in efforts to manipulate the outcome of the elections.

15. (C) Wilber Lopez, the Carazo coordinator of "Vamos con Eduardo", met emboffs along with representatives from individual municipalities. Almost all were relatively young (in their 30s), but with long local experience in Nicaragua's turbulent politics, dating back to 1990 in most cases. Many were former PLC youth leaders. All described themselves as "100 percent Liberal" and stated that they still considered themselves to be PLC members even though most have been thrown out of the party for supporting Montealegre. Lopez and his subordinates asserted that they are building a strong departmental organization, going house to house to rally support, and have garnered over 10,000 supporters in seven months of work thus far. They claimed that even many of those who remain in local PLC structures privately support Montealegre as the most viable liberal candidate.

16. (C) In addition to training party activists to defend the vote as "fiscales" on election day, the "Eduardo" movement is also preparing a campaign to assist voters in obtaining the required identity documents ("cedulas"). Although they welcomed the idea of a broad center-right alliance free of Aleman, they doubted whether such an alliance is possible, asserting that if voter turnout is sufficiently high, they could win in Carazo without such an alliance. While most outside observers acknowledged Montealegre's popularity and his regular campaigning in Carazo, many questioned the movement's claims regarding the strength of its organization and its ability to change the allegiance of die-hard rural PLC voters.

NATIVE-SON LEWITES POPULAR IN CARAZO TOWNS, BUT NOT MUCH
IMPACT IN COUNTRYSIDE

17. (C) Although he was most recently mayor of Managua, Herty Lewites is originally from Jinotepe, the departmental capital of Carazo. His "Hertylandia" theme/waterpark is located in

the department, and when he was Minister of Tourism in the 1980s, he helped bring a variety of tourism-related investments to Carazo. Lewites thus enjoys a reputation for pragmatism and promotion of jobs and development in Carazo, and has a natural base of support there. The mayor of Jinotepe, who was elected on the FSLN ticket in 2004, is actually from the Sandinista Renewal Movement (MRS), one of the members of Lewites' electoral coalition, and is actively supporting his campaign.

18. (C) Except for one FSLN town counselor from La Conquista who "crashed" emboffs meeting with the PLC mayor there, everyone else agreed that Lewites enjoys widespread support in urban areas of Carazo, particularly with many small business owners and educated public sector workers (teachers, doctors, etc.). Some officials of other parties feared that Lewites might draw as many urban votes from the center-right parties as he would from the FSLN, and many questioned whether the Herty/Daniel split is anything more than a Sandinista tactic to divide the "democratic" vote. Most interlocutors questioned the strength of Lewites' local organization and doubted that his support extended into rural areas. However, everyone acknowledged that Lewites is campaigning actively and visibly throughout the department.

ALVARADO SUPPORTERS LEANING TOWARDS PLC, BUT CANDIDATE
INVISIBLE IN CARAZO

19. (C) Although his local supporters claim otherwise, emboffs saw and heard little to suggest that APRE pre-candidate Jose Antonio Alvarado has much of a campaign organization in Carazo, has campaigned in the department at all, or enjoys any real degree of popular support there. Other than APRE officials, no one even mentioned Alvarado in any context until emboffs asked about him. When asked, virtually everyone reported that, as far as they know, Alvarado is not

active in Carazo.

110. (C) Emboffs heard a very different story from APRE Departmental President Erick Mendieta, who is also the departmental president of the "Amigos de Alvarado." Mendieta and a small group of APRE departmental officials met emboffs in the town of Diriamba, in a building with a large sign proclaiming it to be the local office of APRE National Assembly deputy Miguel Lopez Baldizon. Mendieta proclaimed APRE the "Third Force" in Carazo (after the PLC and FSLN), a reference to its performance in the 2004 municipal elections that does not take into account the subsequent fracturing and desertions the party has suffered. In keeping with the recent tentative rapprochement of APRE leaders Lopez and Alvarado with Aleman's PLC, Mendieta asserted that APRE maintains good relations with the PLC and Camino Cristiano in Carazo and that a grand center-right alliance of all these parties will be required to defeat the FSLN.

111. (C) In a refrain often used by Alvarado and his supporters (as well as by the PLC), Mendieta dismissed as inaccurate and flawed polls showing Montealegre and Lewites to be the country's two most popular politicians. Mendieta insisted that the polls do not represent sentiments in Carazo, neglecting both Alvarado's support and the rural strength of the PLC. Early in the meeting, Mendieta dismissed Eduardo Montealegre's chances in Carazo, claiming that while he might enjoy a certain popularity, h?Q8]practical people, the party's departmental leaders were among the most unpleasant, intransigent PLC officials emboffs have ever met. Such differences are not uncommon (see refetel), as local PLC elected officials are often more open and flexible than their counterparts in the party structures. While Chavez and his councilors agreed that the PLC needs to become more democratic and stated that theQQBH3I]0g and that of the "Vamos con Eduardo" group were striking. While Wilber Lopez of "Vamos con Eduardo" acted as though he was leading a meeting of equals, and the other "Vamos con Eduardo" officials present all spoke their minds when they wished, it was obvious that Tapia was the local PLC caudillo, and that no one could speak without his approval. The PLC representatives, as a group, were also significantly older than their "Vamos con Eduardo" counterparts, and did not give the impression of being the sort of people who had ever been out defending the vote on election day.

114. (C) In a wide-ranging, reality-defying diatribe, Tapia insisted that in Carazo, the PLC organization and support are as strong as ever, that Montealegre has no organization and has met with "total rejection" in the department, that every PLC member in Carazo agreed one hundred percent with every decision ever taken by Aleman and his inner circle in Managua, that Aleman was a "political prisoner" who had never stolen a cent, and that no Aleman-Ortega "pact" had ever existed. Tapia and his cohorts insisted that Aleman is the "indispensable leader" of the PLC and that the party could not change leadership in a time of "crisis." Tapia claimed that the local PLC enjoys good relations with all of the other local political forces on the right of the spectrum--except for "Vamos con Eduardo", with which they have no relations whatsoever. Tapia and company were unwilling or unable to offer any commentary on the various PLC presidential "pre-candidates", save to proclaim that whichever one is ultimately selected will win the general election. While some kind of rapprochement with Jose Antonio Alvarado might be possible in Tapia's view, no accommodation could possibly be reached with Montealegre, whom he derided as rejecting primary elections now that the PLC had accepted them.

115. (C) While the PLC organization in Carazo is a shadow of its former self and while no PLC presidential pre-candidate enjoys any significant support there, Tapia and his followers were not the only ones to claim that uneducated rural voters accustomed to voting for the PLC slot on the ballot ("casilla") would unthinkingly punch the same ticket as usual, effectively making the PLC an indispensable part of any strategy to win the rural areas. Such claims are difficult to evaluate, but anti-Sandinista rural voters in Nicaragua have a history of voting for whichever force they believe is most likely to prevent an Ortega victory.

FSLN DIVIDED BY LEWITES, BUT RETAINS ITS HARD CORE

116. (C) Carazo has been strongly anti-Sandinista since the

inception of democracy in Nicaragua in 1990, and the current predominance of FSLN mayors in the department is largely a result of high voter abstention in 2004 and the sharp divisions amongst the "democratic" parties that year (see paragraph 18). Virtually all of emboffs' interlocutors agreed that the Sandinista vote in Carazo tops out at 30 percent of the electorate. Only disillusionment with politics and corresponding high abstention, shenanigans by the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), and divisions among the "democratic forces" allowed the FSLN to make significant inroads in Carazo in the 2004 municipal elections. With Lewites apparently drawing off a significant portion of these voters, at least in urban areas, numerous observers characterized the FSLN as "badly divided" in Carazo. Given these circumstances, only a Lewites return to the FSLN fold, high voter abstention (which is not common in Nicaraguan presidential/legislative elections), or new CSE machinations could enable an FSLN breakthrough in Carazo. Perhaps in part as a result of these realities, Daniel Ortega has yet to campaign in any serious way in the department.

EVERYONE WORRIED ABOUT CSE INCOMPETENCE AND PRO-FSLN BIAS

¶17. Everyone emboffs met expressed concern on the ability and the desire of the CSE to carry out free and fair elections in November. All of the representatives of the center-right parties stated that they are planning and implementing projects to obtain cédulas for their voters, as the local CSE official actively obstructed the efforts of their voters while facilitating the applications of FSLN militants and the delivery of their cédulas. This was particularly a problem for non-FSLN rural voters, who must travel to Jinotepe to apply for and obtain cédulas. Sandinista voters do not suffer such difficulties, as their cédulas are delivered to them by CSE officials. Emboffs also heard regular complaints that the CSE is issuing cédulas to underage FSLN sympathizers. Aside from such biases, numerous party officials also complained that the CSE has never made any kind of effort to update the electoral register or issue cédulas until a few months before each election.

CARAZO: DEMOGRAPHICS AND VOTING PROFILE

¶18. (U) Total Population (2003 est.): 178,818
 Total Urban Population: 109,614
 Total Rural Population: 69,204

Votes Received by Party, 2004 Municipal Elections

PLC:	17,080
FSLN:	25,167
APRE:	8,459
CCN:	1,014
PLI:	600
AC:	488
PLN:	390
PRN:	307
MSL:	120

COMMENT

¶19. (C) Since 1990, Carazo has been a strongly anti-Sandinista department. When the non-Sandinista parties were more united, they won six out of eight municipalities in the 2000 municipal elections. But when they were sharply divided in the 2004 municipal elections, and their voters disillusioned with the direction of national politics, abstention was over 50 percent and the FSLN took seven out of eight municipalities. However, even with historically high abstention in 2004, the combined votes of anti-FSLN parties were larger than the Sandinista tally in all but two of the eight municipalities. Particularly if Herty Lewites remains in the race and divides the FSLN vote, Carazo is a department that the center-right forces should win--if they can overcome their differences. Herty Lewites and Eduardo Montealegre have started their campaigns with the advantage of widespread popularity, but the depth of their organizational strength remains in doubt, as well as their ability to change ingrained rural voting preferences. However, despite PLC and APRE claims that poor campesinos are blindly loyal to Aleman and the PLC, they and other anti-FSLN voters have

demonstrated considerable electoral savvy in the past, casting their ballots for whatever force seemed most capable of defeating Daniel Ortega. If Montealegre can build a solid organization and convince people that his movement has eclipsed the PLC, he stands a good chance of persuading rural voters in Carazo and elsewhere not to "waste" their ballots by casting them for the PLC.

TRIVELLI